

Shovel Talks (Dig In Deep) by [lilies_in_a_vase](#)

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Summary:

5 times the Party gives Billy a shovel talk after he starts dating Steve, and 1 time Max fixes the damage done by them.

Shovel Talks (Dig In Deep)

Author's Note:

This is because I... hate the idea of shovel talks? I mean, they can be fun, if they're said in a jokey-way? But when they're done in all seriousness, it feels like either the one giving the shovel talk doesn't trust their loved one to make good decisions in who they choose to have a relationship with, or they're just going to make the one being given the talk feel like shit. I don't know. I'm up for discussion.

Anyway.

TRIGGER WARNING:

Some references to abuse, and Neil being racist, but the worst is probably during a description of Billy's nightmares.

Disclaimer: I don't own "Stranger Things".

1.

Billy knows this thing he's got going with Steve is temporary.

Of course it is. Steve's a senior, and while Billy doesn't think he's planning to go straight to college after summer, he probably won't stay more than a year. And by that time, Billy will also have graduated, and Billy definitely won't be staying in Hawkins.

But more than that, Steve is *good*. Billy's not used to getting to have good things. He's definitely not used to getting to *keep* them.

He's long ago accepted he must've done something truly horrible in a previous life, or there must just be something fundamentally wrong with him, because why else would the universe keep punishing him like this?

Still, it does surprise him when the first of Steve's children confronts him. It probably shouldn't, though. They all seem weirdly protective over the people they consider part of their group.

Billy's with Steve at the diner across the street from the Arcade when Curly shows up. Steve's just left to go to the bathroom, and technically, they're on a date that doubles as babysitting, but they can't exactly call it that, for obvious reasons. So they sit opposite each other and sometimes knock a foot into the other's leg, but for everyone else they're just two dudes going for a bite while waiting for their siblings.

Curly appears out of nowhere and slides into the booth Steve just vacated.

"Mum's in the bathroom," Billy says before he can speak.

"I know. It's you I wanted to talk to."

Billy just raises an eyebrow.

“I don’t like you,” Curly says.

“Feeling’s mutual.”

Curly scowls, but sighs and continues. “But for some reason, Steve seems to like you. And Steve’s like a brother to me. So I’m here to tell you that if you hurt him, I will come after you. I know where he keeps the bat.”

Billy’s other eyebrow goes up. “Good to know.”

“I’m serious.” He is. Billy can see it in his eyes.

“Alright.”

“I read lots of biology books, I know exactly where to hit to make it hurt.”

It would be funny, Billy being threatened by a barely fourteen year old, but the thing is that Billy also knows that, although not from reading, but from experience in being hit ‘exactly where it hurts’.

But Billy doesn’t say that, instead he just nods, faux serious, and says, “Of course you do. Now fuck off.”

To his credit, Curly does, in fact, fuck off, although not before throwing Billy the finger. He walks backwards all the way to the front door of the diner pointing it at him.

Billy watches him leave through the window, cross the street and go back to the Arcade, and misses Steve coming back until he's halfway to sitting down. He knocks his foot against Billy's leg.

"Hey babe," he says lowly, so no one else can hear him. "Sorry it took me a while. The queue was pretty long."

Billy shakes his head, tries to clear it from thoughts of that nail bat sailing through the air to land between his legs.

Steve frowns. "You okay?"

Billy sucks on his bottom lip, bites a bit of the skin off until he tastes blood. "Sure, yeah. I'm alright. Was just starting to wonder if you'd squeezed yourself through the window to escape."

Steve laughs. "Never." His fingers twitch, and Billy's certain he's barely keeping himself from covering Billy's hand with his own.

Billy really doesn't deserve him.

2.

Wheeler's a bit more unexpected, if Billy's honest.

Billy's in his car outside the Wheeler residence, waiting for Max after one of their DnD sessions. Their relationship has gotten better, since she stood up to him and drugged him - Billy's still not really over that, though, and the pesky little detail that she still hasn't given him a believable explanation for what the fuck was going on that night, although she did bring him a bag of frozen veggies after his dad had his way with him that morning, so maybe she's somewhat forgiven - and Billy promised to stop bothering her and her friends.

Which is why this development is annoying more than anything else.

"You know, I promised Max I would stop pestering her friends, but it gets really fucking hard when you guys start following *me*." He says through the Camaro's rolled down window, letting smoke from his cigarette curl out through parted lips.

Wheeler crosses his arms. "I'm not following you. This is *my* house."

"Yeah, and I'm just waiting for my sister. What do you want?"

"Steve is our friend."

Oh Jesus Christ, you too? Billy can't help but sigh.

Wheeler narrows his eyes. "He's our friend, and he's my sister's friend. I'll admit I liked him less when he was dating her, but he's nice now, and he drives us around and lets us hang out at his place, so I'm grateful for that. And I don't want him to turn back into an asshole, a worse one, just because he's dating you. You have one warning, Hargrove. Don't hurt my friends again."

'Again.' Jesus Fucking Christ.

Billy still has nightmares about that night. About Neil having gone out looking for Max with him, however unlikely that scenario is, and finding her in that nuthouse with four boys, one of them older than Billy and another black, and killing first Lucas, then his friends when they undoubtedly tried to defend him, then Max. About hearing her screams fade as Neil forces Billy to punch Steve until he stops moving. And then, Billy dreams of Neil grabbing the bat and finishing him off.

Then Billy wakes, shaking and sweaty and crying, and sometimes Steve's been in the bed with him when that happens. When Steve wakes up, Billy will refuse to tell him what he dreamed off, will lock himself in the bathroom and try not to throw up. Take a shower until he feels human again. When Steve sleeps through Billy's nightmares, he won't wake him, because Steve has dark bags underneath his eyes that speak of sleepless nights, even though he never has nightmares when Billy's there. Billy knows this, because Billy has trained himself to wake up at the slightest shift of a mattress, the tiniest sound. So when Steve sleeps through Billy's nightmares, Billy will curl up next to him and put his arms around him and try not to remember when

he felt Steve's soft skin break underneath Billy's knuckles.

Wheeler's turned around, is walking back up to his front door. "And stop flirting with my mother!" he throws over his shoulder before closing the door.

Billy bursts out laughing, and he laughs until he has to rest his head back against the seat, and closes his eyes to force back the tears burning behind his eyelids. He fists his hands into the fabric of his jeans, the nails boring half moons into the skin of his palms.

The passenger side door opens a few minutes later, and Billy glances to the side to see Max getting in. She opens her mouth as if to speak, but her eyes catch the read of his eyes, and his clenched hands, and instead she leans forward and turns the stereo on. They don't speak the whole way home.

3.

Lucas is next.

Billy's been dreading this one. He knows a little bit of the dynamics in 'the party', from hearing Max complain and Steve ramble, so he knows that if both Dustin and Mike have said something, then Lucas will too.

That said, Lucas doesn't really look that comfortable with this situation, either.

Billy had apologised for pushing him up against that wall and threatening him, but he'd also sat both him and Max down and explained to them that Neil Hargrove was a horrible racist and if he found out that Max was seeing Lucas, the least of their problems would be Neil packing the Hargrove-Mayfields up and moving them out of Hawkins.

In some strange way, Billy's glad Steve's got these kids. Because even though they've only dated for a couple of weeks, Billy's pretty certain Steve's parents are barely in their son's life. If only based on the amount of times Billy's been able to sleep over without a single worry of parents walking in on them.

In the end, Lucas goes for the shortest route. Straight to the point, which Billy thinks is a quality in him that Max must like. She's never had a thing for bullshit.

Probably why they weren't such good siblings. Billy's full of bullshit.

"I'm not afraid of you, and I know where you live." Of course he does; Billy's pretty certain Lucas is the one who sneaked Max out that night. "Don't you dare hurt him."

Billy's nightmares have been getting worse. More frequent, too. Three nights ago, Billy woke both him and Steve up. He jammed an elbow

into Steve's stomach in an attempt to get away from the Neil in his dreams, which woke Steve, and Steve's following shout woke Billy. When he realised what he'd done, he'd almost fallen off the bed in his haste to get away, even though all he wanted to do was reach out.

Steve was the one who reached out instead, saying that it was alright because Billy hadn't meant to, but the images, the goddamn memories, were still fresh in Billy's mind, so he'd actually broken down in Steve's arms. Had sobbed out that he was sorry. Again and again.

He didn't say what for, and Steve. Steve didn't ask. Which Billy figures means that Steve probably knows what Billy'd been apologising for, and thus probably also agrees he hasn't been penalised enough for it.

At this point, Billy's getting more and more certain he wouldn't fight back if a group of fourteen year olds came to enact their revenge on him.

He kind of wishes they'd just get it over with and hit him now. As a sort of preventative measure. Because Billy knows he's going to fuck up eventually. It'll probably be soon. And it won't be pretty.

Billy doesn't really know if he ought to be surprised or not that Max' newest friend, Jane, is the next to find him.

On the one hand, the girl is really weird, seems very kind, and barely speaks, with big, understanding eyes that seem too old for her age.

On the other hand, there's something really tough about her, like she can withstand anything, and she's Chief Hopper's daughter, that Hopper adopted, which means she's been in the system, which means that is probably true.

And she's a daughter whom Hopper apparently lets wander by herself through the woods, which seems irresponsible, but what does Billy know about good parenting styles?

He's smoking on the hood of the Camaro, up by the quarry, when Jane steps out between the trees and almost makes him jump out of his skin.

"Jesus Christ!" he shouts, and drops his cigarette. If Billy's not mistaken, she's got a tiny little smirk pulling at her lips at his reaction.

She hasn't even spoken yet, and Billy's already pretty certain he knows where this is going.

"Steve is my friend."

Yep, there it is. *Here we go.*

“And you’re his,” she adds.

Still, Billy chuckles, picks out a new cigarette and stuffs it between his lips as he reaches for his lighter. “I’m more than that, kid.”

She tilts her head, nods. “Yes.” Then she doesn’t speak, not until Billy’s put away his lighter and is back to giving her his full attention. “I’ve hurt people. Before. Bad people. I can do it again.”

Then she turns on her heel, and walks back into the forest, leaving Billy with his smokes. He does his best to suppress a shiver at the iciness of her words.

5.

The one that hurts the most, strangely, is Baby Byers.

The kid’s just always seemed... soft. Kind, like Jane, but softer. Billy heard he got lost in the woods and his family thought he’d died, so he’s got his fair share of trauma, Billy guesses, but he’s still seemed to retain some sense of... not nativity, no, but. Compassion, perhaps. Or hope.

It's Friday night, and Billy's early. But it's not for the multitude of bad reasons Billy would usually have for being early, he just hadn't had anything better to do. He'd told Max as much when she stuck her head out through a window when she'd heard him pull up.

He's going to Steve's after dropping Max off at home, and Neil and Susan think he's going to a party, the two of them going out for dinner. It's been a good week, so he's allowed to get drunk and crash at a friend's place instead of driving home tonight. Although Billy doubts he's going to get drunk. He'll probably just share a beer with Steve in his backyard, and then they'll cook dinner together, and watch a movie while they eat, and make out on the couch, and have sex in Steve's shower, and then they'll cuddle in bed and go to sleep. It's so fucking domestic. It's goddamn bliss.

The front door opens, and Baby Byers slips out. Billy hasn't been inside since *that* night, but he hopes that it doesn't still look the way it did when Billy left. Thinks it can't be good for the sanity of its inhabitants.

Billy rolls down his window and puts his hand outside before the kid's even halfway to his car.

"What do you need, BB?"

That makes the kid stop a few feet away, and he screws his face up in confusion. "'BB'?"

Billy gestures at him. "Baby Byers."

Baby Byers sets his jaw at that, looking a bit like he can't decide if he wants to roll his eyes or shout swear words at Billy. If Baby Byers were to swear, Billy's knows he'd piss himself laughing.

Baby Byers fists his hands, once, twice, before he lets them relax. God, the kid is so scrawny you'd think an ill timed breeze would knock him down, but standing there with his arms at his sides and that stupid bowl cut in his eyes, he looks strong. Steady. An ancient oak rooted to its spot.

"My dad used to hit my mum," Baby Byers says, and, well, shit. That wasn't what Billy had been expecting.

There's a surge of anxiety in his stomach as he wonders if the kid's figured him out. If he knows something. If Max told him, because she'd thought he would understand. Shit, maybe he would.

"I only saw it a few times. Heard it, more often. Jonathan would play music so we didn't have to hear them arguing, but I always knew what he was doing. That he was trying to protect me."

Maybe he was trying to protect himself, too , Billy thinks.

"But then dad hit Jonathan. Only once, and that was enough. Mum threw him out. All his things were gone that same day. I didn't get why it took her so long. And dad never hurt mum as bad as you hurt

Steve.”

Billy’s going to fucking throw up.

Baby Byers frowns. “I don’t get why he would date you after that. But maybe you’ve shown him something you haven’t shown us. I don’t know. I just want you to know that my friends? We’re a family. And we protect our own. So don’t do it again.”

Once the door closes behind Baby Byers, Billy spends five minutes trying to breathe through the panic, the blinding fucking *pain*, in his chest before he gives up. He throws the Camaro door open and rushes to the front door, pounding on it with his fist. In the back of his mind, Billy thinks that this doesn’t really change their opinion of him as anything other than an asshole, but that doesn’t matter right now. Billy needs to *leave*.

Max opens the door. “I thought you said-?”

“I changed my mind. Get in the car.”

He turns on his heel and leaves her staring after him as he basically throws himself into his seat.

His hands won’t stop shaking.

Jesus Christ, he’s just like his fucking dad, isn’t he? Just like Mr.

Fucking Byers, who used to hit his wife until she threw him out. It's just a matter of time before everyone, his dad, Susan, Max, *Steve*, throw Billy out.

And the worst thing, is that he would deserve it.

'We're a family. And we protect our own.'

Billy's never had anyone to protect him.

For a second, he spares a moment to wonder if Max has confronted Steve with threats of what she'll do to him if he hurts her big brother. Then he dismisses the idea as ridiculous, because Steve is good, and Billy's not, so really, he should probably be expecting Max to eventually start threatening Billy, too.

But she doesn't need to. Billy's made his decision. The right decision, for once in his life.

It's a blur, driving home, but he hears Max when she shouts after him, "Weren't you going to go to Steve's?" as he hurries out of the Camaro and to the front door. He barely gets the key into the lock.

"Don't feel good," Billy answers, which is true, because as soon as the door is open he's running to the bathroom and falling to his knees in front of the toilet.

Max comes to stand in the open doorway with a glass of water from the kitchen just as Billy's finished throwing up. "You're sick?" she asks, sounding so concerned his heart actually aches. "Is that way we had to go home?"

"Sure, shitbird," Billy mutters, taking the glass from her and swishing the water around in his mouth before spitting into the bowl. "Thanks."

He flushes the toilet and uses it to heave himself up on shaky legs.

"Can I do anything?"

He shakes his head, swallowing. "Nah. Gonna go to bed."

Max must tell their parents he's sick, because no one bothers him. All that happens is that Susan shows up the next morning, voice gentle. "Max told us you were feeling bad?"

Billy just turns his back to her and lets out a groan in answer.

"We're going to the movies this afternoon," Susan says. "I'll make chicken soup, leave it out on the stove for you."

Billy doesn't thank her, he just curls up tighter and she closes the door and leaves him be.

Steve knows better than to call the house, and Billy's glad for it. He can't imagine what he'd had said if Steve called him last night when he didn't show up. Billy was supposed to spend the evening, and the night, and the morning, with him, but instead he laid in his bed, nauseous and panicked, in a bundle of self-hate, and then he woke up four times during the night.

He hears it when Max and their parents leave, and he musters up the strength to get up and do what needs to be done.

True to her word, Susan's got chicken soup out, and Billy eats it, even though he isn't really sick. It does nothing to warm up the cold feeling going through him. Billy reaches for the phone.

"Harrington residence, Steve speaking."

"Hey."

"Billy! Max told me you were sick, babe." And isn't that just another nail in Billy's coffin. Max has a walkie talkie, she can talk to her friends whenever she wants. Billy can't even call his boyfriend on the fucking phone when his family's around. And none of them ever thought that maybe he should also get a walkie. *"You doing alright? Did your parents leave you alone? That's real shitty of them, but I mean, at least I can come over then, if you want, help make you feel better--"*

"Steve," Billy interrupts, and prides himself on how steady his voice is. Practice from dealing with his dad.

Billy breaks up with Steve that afternoon. Over the phone, when Max is out at the movies with their parents, because he's a fucking coward. Hangs up before Steve can ask him any questions.

Then he slips into his bed with the covers over his head and cries himself to sleep.

+1

Max lets it go on for a week.

Billy doesn't leave his room that entire weekend. Max isn't sure if he even eats. But she chalks it up to being sick, and figures she's right when he's back behind the wheel on Monday.

But he's strangely moody, every morning, more so than even before the night she fought monsters, and Max knows their relationship is better now, now that she knows about his dad, but she doesn't think they're close enough to talk about their feelings. Not when it isn't anything serious.

But it soon becomes apparent that it is serious. Because Billy leaves the bathroom looking like he's just finished crying, and Billy only listens to sad, depressive songs, and Billy barely eats, and Billy is

somehow both lifting dumbbells aggressively and like he can't bear the weight of them, and Max has heard him crying out in his sleep, and he barely leaves his room.

She realises it must have something to do with Steve when Billy drops her off at the Arcade that Thursday and then drives off in a hurry, instead of waiting for Steve to show up so they can go on one of their secret dates.

So when Steve shows up to pick up the others, earlier than usual, Max tells them to keep playing because she needs to ask Steve something.

She opens the passenger side door and climbs into the Beemer.

"Hey!" Steve protests. He's got sunglasses on, which is a little weird for early spring.

"What did you do to my brother?"

Steve's mouth falls open. "What did I...? Max, *he* broke up with me!"

What? That doesn't... make any sense. Billy's been doing so much better since he started dating Steve. He's so much happier. He's even really goddamn *nice* to her, now.

"He wouldn't," she says.

"I'm telling you he did. He called me Saturday, told me it was over, and since then he's been avoiding me at school. He's even skipped practice all week! He's just... he's just acting like such an asshole." Steve's voice breaks at the last word, and Max has a sneaking suspicion, so she reaches out and plucks his sunglasses off his nose.

Yep. Red, puffy eyes, the way they only get after crying for a long time.

She sighs. "You, too?"

Steve looks about to ask her what that means, but then Dustin wrenches the door open.

"Hey! My seat!"

Max pushes Steve's glasses into his chest and he scrambles to put them back on as she changes places with Dustin.

"Isn't Billy coming to get you?" Mike asks.

"He is," Max answers. "I just needed to ask Steve something. I've got my answer."

Dustin wants to know what they'd talked about, but Max flicks his

arm and tells him there's something called privacy, and then she leaves the boys there and goes back inside to wait for Billy.

He shows up a couple of minutes after Steve's left, and Max asks him to stop by the quarry. It's private, and better than the car park for this conversation.

But Billy shakes his head. "I've got homework, shitbird. Ain't have time for this shit."

Max knows for a fact that he's just going to hide out in his bedroom, crying and listening to music, until Neil and her mum get home from work.

"Fine. Why did you break up with Steve?"

Billy's hands clench on the steering wheel. "What did you say?" He's trying to sound tough, but Max can see the way he worries at his lower lip.

"Why did you break up with Steve?"

Billy doesn't answer, he just shakes his head. He turns on his music, but halfway home Max still hears the sob he's trying to hide.

"Because I don't fucking deserve him," Billy whispers, finally, once he's parked the Camaro. Then he's off, out of his seat and throwing

the door closed, hurrying into the house.

Max is so freaking confused.

—

The explanation comes the next day.

It's DnD night at the Wheelers', and per her new agreement with Hopper, El gets to attend every other week. Meaning the whole party's together.

Mrs. Wheeler lets her in with a happy greeting, and then her smile transforms into that weird one she always gets with Billy. Max does her best to suppress a shudder, but she's happy Billy's sadness and avoidance of Steve is at least making him drive back home immediately instead of winking at Mike's mum.

Mike's downstairs when Max gets there, and she helps him get the game out and ready while they wait for the others.

The evening goes as usual for the first hour. Then Mrs. Wheeler shows up with snacks and forces them to take a break from playing, and they, albeit reluctantly, do.

“Steve was sad,” El says, munching on a cookie.

Dustin perks up. “Right? I noticed it too! He’s been weird all week.”

The cookie in Max’ own mouth tastes suddenly very, very dry. “He and Billy broke up.”

“What?” Mike and Lucas say, while Dustin lets out a whoop and throws a fist into the air.

“I’m sorry?” Max says, turning a glare at him. Then she takes in the others expressions, the weird way Dustin shifts, how Lucas and Mike both look angry but knowing, how Will is frowning and El... El just looks sad. And Max is hit with dawning realisation. She narrows her eyes at each of them in turn. “What. Did. You. Do?”

“Nothing!” Dustin shouts, at the same time as Lucas says, “We just talked to him!”

“Oh? Which one is it going to be? Either you didn’t do shit or you talked to him.”

Mike looks a bit like he actually finds her scary. Good. “... the second.”

“And which one of them did you talk to?” she asks, although she knows. She just wants them to admit it.

“We talked to Billy.”

“And was this a planned endeavour that I wasn’t let in on, or...?”

“It didn’t... start that way,” Dustin tries. “I just went to tell Billy that if he hurt Steve, I would come after him. With the bat. And...”

“And...?” Max prompts, as though it isn’t already bad enough.

“And I told him I knew where to hit to make it hurt.”

El lets out a little noise at that, doing a pretty good job of voicing the dread building up in Max. *So does Neil Hargrove.*

“And then I kind of told the guys. And El. But we- We didn’t want to tell you, because, conflict of interest, you know?”

“No, I don’t know! What the fuck were you thinking?”

“That he could hurt Steve again! That he needed to know we wouldn’t stand for it!”

Max clenches her teeth. She wants to shout more at them, but that isn't going to get her anywhere, so instead she says, "And the rest of you? What did you say?"

"I told him I didn't want him to turn Steve back into an asshole," Mike says, and crosses his arms over his chest. "And I stand by that."

"Of course you do," Max mutters, rolling her eyes at him.

"I told him I wasn't afraid of him, and that I knew where he lived in case he hurt Steve," Lucas says.

"El was next," Dustin says, and Max feels a spike of betrayal. She never thought El would...

"We talked about how he was more than Steve's friend. And I said I had hurt bad men before," El says sheepishly.

Max sighs. "Jesus Christ, El." She drags a hand across her face. "Will?" He doesn't immediately answer, so Max puts her hand away and looks at him.

His fingering at a loose thread and staring at his lap. His voice is serious when he speaks.

"I told him about my dad, and my mum, and Jonathan. And I said I didn't get why Steve would stay with someone that hurt him."

And after all of the shit they'd said, that must have really broken him.

"Did you tell him that Friday, last week?"

"Yeah."

Her friends really are the goddamn reason her brother's stupid, fragile heart is broken again. When it was just starting to heal. God fucking damn it.

"You do know that Steve's eighteen years old, right? He's older than all of us, he's older than Billy! Why don't you think he's capable of making his own decisions, of deciding who to date? Do you really think he'd stay in a bad relationship?"

"It's not always that easy," Will says with heat, looking up at her, and Max thinks about her mum, and thinks that *no, it probably isn't*.

But Steve isn't her mum, and Billy isn't Neil Hargrove. Isn't Lonnie Byers.

"You're so lucky you have Joyce as a mum, do you realise that? If she hadn't thrown your dad out when she did, if she didn't... *exist*, then

Jonathan could have turned out just like Billy.”

“What the hell is that supposed to-?” Mike starts, but El interrupts him.

“Bad men,” she says, nodding, and it seems like all of their friends realise what she means at the same time.

Thank God for El. Their friendship had a rocky start, but Max is so grateful she has a female friend amidst all these idiotic boys in her life.

“Billy’s angry. Hurting. Like my sister,” El continues. They all heard about Kali, how she and her friends tried to get El to help them murder someone. A bad man, from the lab. One who hurt them. Max would be lying if she said the thought of taking Steve’s nail bat to Neil hasn’t been tempting.

“Shit,” Dustin says.

Will looks vaguely ill, Mike like he wants to hit something.

“He’s so, so sad. They both are. But,” and Max knows Billy doesn’t want them to know, but she thinks it will help them to understand how much they’ve fucked up, so she says it anyway, “Billy doesn’t eat. He cries all the time. Has nightmares, too. I don’t think he’s slept through a single night this entire week.”

“Billy Hargrove *cries?*” Dustin asks, and El reaches over and smacks his arm. Dustin throws his arms up in defence.

“He’s fucking human!” Max shouts at him.

“Sorry, sorry!” At least he looks regretful when he looks up at her. “I’m sorry.”

“Good. You should be.” She points at the boys in front of her. “You need to fix this. Tonight.”

It’s hard to get back into the game after that, but they do eventually find some semblance of normalcy.

Until the Beemer pulls up outside, and every single one of them straightens up and stands at attention.

“El, come with me. We’ll go and get him,” Max says, and the other girl quickly stands up to follow her up the stairs.

El bounces over to the Beemer and knocks on the glass. Steve rolls it down.

“Steve,” she says. “You need to come in. We need to talk.”

Steve frowns at them. No sunglasses tonight, Max notices. "Something happen?"

"The guys just really have something they need to tell you," Max says, and Steve raises his eyebrows but does step out and follow them back inside.

On the way down the stairs, Max just hears the end of an argument on whether they should start with an explanation or an apology.

She goes to lean against the wall with El while Steve stops in front of the boys.

"Alright, I'm here. What did you need to tell me?"

"We messed up, Steve," Lucas says.

Steve raises his eyebrows. "What did you do?"

"Billy," Dustin says, not meeting any of their eyes.

Steve swallows, narrowing his eyes at them. "What about Billy?"

“We didn’t want him to hurt you!” Will says.

“We just wanted him to know we had your back, and-“ Mike starts.

“We’re sorry!” Dustin finishes, his eyes begging for forgiveness as he stares up at Steve.

“What the hell did you do?” Steve asks them, and it’s probably worse that he doesn’t shout. He sounds eerily calm.

And so they launch into the explanation they’d given Max, even adding in the bits about Billy’s current lack of coping Max had told them about. By the end of it, Steve’s collapsed on the arm of the couch, stopping from dragging a hand through his hair to massage the bridge of his nose.

“I’m going to forgive you, because I fucking love you guys, and I know you were only looking out for me, as misjudged as it was. But I want you to know that I am so, so fucking angry at you lot right now. And how long I stay angry depends on what Billy says tomorrow. Max, can you get him to stay at the Byers? Don’t let him run off before I talk to him.”

She nods, smiles a little. “Yeah, sure. I can do that.”

“Great. Let’s get me my boyfriend back.”

That following afternoon, Max doesn't get out of the Camaro when Billy parks outside the Byers'.

"You getting out or what?" Billy asks, his eyes fixed on the parked Beemer in front of them.

"Not yet," she says.

"No?" He glances at her, and she nods at the car.

"Steve's here."

Billy's eyes widen, and Max sees his hand start to tremble. "Max, what the hell-?"

"You two need to talk."

He looks away from her, takes a shuddering breath in. "No. No, we fucking do not. There- T-There's nothing to talk- shit." He brings his hands up, covering his face, but Max sees his shoulders shake. Knows he's crying. "*Fuck.*"

“It’s okay.”

“No it fucking isn’t, it’s-,” he snuffles.

“It is. He loves you.”

“Oh my god, Maxine, don’t-“

“It’s true,” Steve says, because Max rolled down her window when Billy turned away from her.

Billy startles at the sound of his voice, and turns sharply to look up at him. He’s not trying to hide he’s crying, not like he does with her, and Max realises with a pang that this isn’t the first time Steve’s seen Billy crying. Their relationship had been more serious than even she’d thought.

“Hey, babe,” Steve whispers, and Max takes it as her cue to leave. She gently pushes the door open and slips past it, Steve holding it open for her and then taking her place as she goes inside.

She does check on them, half an hour later, glancing out through the window and seeing Billy’s somehow managed to climb halfway over the gear lever, resting his head against Steve’s chest. They’ve both got their arms around one another, and she’s pretty sure Steve’s kissing Billy’s head.

She turns back to her friends, and El catches her gaze. She looks in the direction of the Camaro.

“Happy,” she says, smiling.

They’re going to be alright.

Author's Note:

Hope you guys liked it, please let me know what you thought!